

# Man's best friend? or fearless watchdog?



story and photos by Spc. Amanda Solitario

**LSA ANACONDA, Iraq** — Sometimes it's all about the nose. Soldiers have long used military working dogs to assist in finding explosives and other hazards of the battlefield.

Serving alongside their handlers, military working dogs are proving themselves every day in the fight to secure Iraq's future.

With a keen sense of smell, the dogs are able to pinpoint exact locations of explosive devices, said Army Sgt. Garry Mattingly, a patrol explosive detector dog handler, supporting the 332nd Expeditionary Security Force Squadron.

"If I touched a toy and let it sit for a week, the dog would smell my pheromones on it a week later," he said.

The six Army dog teams at Anaconda have a demanding duty, said Army Sgt. Todd Johnson, one of the other Army dog handlers.

Their operations range from sniffing through the mail coming into the base to checking the local nationals walking in the gates.

Johnson said military working dogs are able to provide a service that no machine or human can offer, adding that their help cuts search time tremendously.

Aside from the daily roaming patrols around the area and the countless vehicle sweeps at the entry control points, the teams are often used for operations off post.

Mattingly and his Dutch shepherd, Mmattias, have answered that call on two separate occasions since their deployment began in January.

On their first mission, the duo helped to locate 16 mortars and the launching accessories. On the second patrol, the team discovered a hidden improvised explosive device.

Both instances helped to make a nearby town safer for its residents and the servicemembers who patrol that area.

Mattingly, an Owensboro, Ky. native, said it can get stressful at times moving through the small towns, but finds comfort in knowing his dog will defend him if necessary.

"With him by my side it makes me feel a little bit better," he said. "I depend on him as much as he does me."

With the challenges missions bring, the dogs need to be strong, aggressive, and obedient, Johnson said. For this reason, the military mostly uses Dutch and German shepherds and Belgian Malinois.

"The breeds are from the herding group," Mattingly said. "They have the ability to do great patrol work as well as detection."

Just as important as their sense of smell and athletic abilities, dogs have the capability to inflict fear in the enemy.

"Dogs tend to know when it is time to make someone fearful of them," Mattingly said. "It is one of the best psychological deterrents the military has."

In order to execute their missions successfully, the dog and the handler have to work well together. The bond between the two has to be mutual, he said.

"You want a dog you can bond with—especially explosive dogs," he said. "It could mean 100 percent success or 100 percent failure."

For some, the bond is instantaneous, and for others it takes months to develop, Mattingly said. No matter how long it takes, the connection between the two is long-lasting.

"Eventually the dog just starts to understand you, and you understand the dog," he said. "Once the initial bond is made between handler and dog, it is hardly broken."

Mattingly and his dog Mmattias have been working together for the last year, and he still remembers the day he picked him up.

Within an hour, Mattingly knew Mmattias was the perfect dog for him. It was an instant connection.

Before being paired up, the dogs go through an initial 120-day training period at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. Mattingly said they are taught basic obedience then more defined skills such as substance detection and aggression.

From there, the dogs and the handlers spend time together in a training environment under the supervision of the instructors. They learn how to work and communicate together.

"The more time you spend with the dog the better the bond," Johnson said.

After the training, the handler is responsible for that dog, said Mattingly. The servicemember grooms, feeds, and cares for the dog. If the dog should get sick, the military provides the necessary veterinary care.

Mattingly said it is an exhausting job with many responsibilities, but he could not picture himself doing anything else.

"I love my job," he said.

"There isn't anything better in the Army. You get to play with a dog all day."

